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AUTHOR Pottorff, Donald D.
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ABSTRACT

Larry arrived from California and was put in a fifth grade class's lowest reading group which was reading third-grade-level basals. Larry was often disruptive during reading instruction and claimed he could only read when the book was upside down. Tests indicated that Larry had normal vision but that he was learning disabled and reading at only a first grade level. Larry had devised a creative tactic which allowed him to escape the reading circle and at the same time to intrigue and impress the other children. Lessons to be learned from Larry are that: (1) what appeared to be a behavior disorder was only symptomatic of inappropriate instruction; (2) children are poor candidates for learning success when they find themselves dealing daily with survival; (3) placement at a proper instructional level cannot be over-emphasized; and (4) the decision to retain or not to retain a child should be made only after a complete evaluation has been accomplished. (RS)

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LESSONS LEARNED FROM AN UPSIDE-DOWN READER: A Case Study of Larry

Donald D. Pottorff

Larry is a monster, Ms. Steinberg blurted out with a look of desperation on her face. Will you speak to him and see if you can help? He is impossible! He turns my reading class into a circus.

I was the reading improvement specialist at the school where Ms. Steinberg taught. Larry had arrived from California and had been enrolled in Ms. Steinberg's 5th grade classroom approximately three weeks before. She indicated that within days he had begun to disrupt her class and to disturb other children.

I asked Ms. Steinberg to be specific and to describe precisely the kinds of negative behaviors that were unnerving her. She explained that the most disruptive behavior occurred when Larry's reading group met for round-robin reading. She had placed him in her lowest group which was assigned to a 3rd grade basal reader. Larry, however, refused to read, insisting that he disliked reading intensely, and that he could not read a book like other children. He claimed that he could only read it upside down. An argument always ensued, at the end of which Larry was either removed from the group or more often removed from the classroom altogether. In the meantime, a great deal of emotion had been spent by Ms. Steinberg, and the members of the group, already below grade level, had seen their precious instructional time greatly diminished.

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Another area of concern was Larry's behavior on the playground. He was described as a verbal bully and an antagonizer who delighted in getting attention through name calling. It seemed, however, that he would persist in this negative attention seeking to the point of a fist fight, but then would retreat as rapidly as possible to the nearest playground supervisor. Needless to say, Larry had made no lasting friendships in his three weeks at Makiminato Elementary School.

Other instructional settings in the classroom were somewhat better for Larry. With the exception of story problems, he seemed to enjoy math and to succeed rather well. He also enjoyed discussions where he could take an opposing point of view and hands-on types of projects in science.

I met with Larry and was surprised to discover just how articulate and outgoing he was, seemingly a far cry from the "monster" described by Ms. Steinberg. He was an oversized boy for 5th grade, tall and lean with dark hair, sparkling brown eyes, and dimples on either cheek. His dark brows were heavy and seemed to contribute to the intenseness of his emotion. He had a rather disarming contagious smile but could just as suddenly furrow his brow to display displeasure or uneasiness.

Larry was a virtual chatterbox, a master at manipulating conversation to his advantage or to the topic of his choice.

Mostly, he chose to talk about his dog, a miniature collie named Joch, who had accompanied him from California.

When I broached the subject of reading, he immediately withdrew and stated that he did not like to read, that in fact he hated to read, and furthermore, he did not wish to even talk about it. Pushing him a bit, he stated that reading was not fun and that he couldn't read like other children. He could only read well with the book turned upside down. Reaching across my desk I found a copy of Madeline's Rescue, by Ludwig Bemelmans, a low primary level book and handed it to him. He immediately turned the book upside down and indeed was able to read it with relative fluency in that position.

At that point, I felt it appropriate to involve the school nurse for vision screening. To the surprise of both of us, Larry's vision tested 20/20. Subsequent visits to an opthamologist further substantiated that Larry had normal visual acuity.

The next step was to meet with Larry's parents. I found Mr. and Mrs. Smith to be concerned parents who felt frustrated in their inability to help their son. The oldest of their four children, Larry had encountered a difficult time with reading from first grade. At the end of second grade, the school had convinced the parents that retention was the solution to catching Larry up. In actuality it had seemed to compound the problem as now he found himself in the same grade as his sister who was an above

average student. His parents saw little or no improvement academically, and a regression in behavior at school began to occur.

At home Larry was a much different boy. He was cooperative, responsible, and usually considered by adults to be well behaved and mature. It became apparent that we were failing Larry and adding to his frustration rather than helping him.

As the evaluation process progressed and my rapport with Larry improved, I began to encourage him to show me just how difficult it was to read a passage right-side up. I soon discovered as I had suspected that there was no difference in his reading in either position. The real issue was not the position of the book but rather that Larry was really crying for help. His instructional level was at the upper limits of first grade. Ms. Steinberg had placed him at a frustration level when she had assigned him to a reading group using 3rd grade materials. Rather than suffer further loss of face and embarrassment, Larry had devised a creative tactic which allowed him to escape the reading circle and at the same time to intrigue and impress the other children.

After the evaluation was concluded, it was discovered that Larry was learning disabled. A special curriculum would need to be developed in the classroom and a pull-out program would be necessary for part of the day.

In the classroom, Larry was immediately removed from the

reading circle and placed in an individualized reading program which utilized trade books, taped materials, peer tutoring, and direct instruction. In addition, cooperative learning techniques were used wherever appropriate. Ms. Steinberg proved to be a terrific manager, and Larry soon began to experience success. Disruptive behavior in the classroom disappeared very quickly, and Larry never again mentioned being able to read upside down.

What lessons can be learned from Larry? First of all, Larry serves as a reminder that we need to be careful in labeling a child. What appeared to have been a behavior disorder was really only symptomatic of inappropriate instruction. In this case Larry was being asked to perform at a frustration level, or two grade levels above his capability. Faced with the impossible, and with his self-esteem being attacked, Larry saw no alternative but to severely act out and to be removed from the group. Unfortunately, this labeled him a trouble-maker with his classmates and contributed to poor school relationships.

Secondly, Larry was expending all of his energies trying to have his needs of acceptance, belonging and self-esteem met. School became a hostile environment for him. Children are poor candidates for learning success when they find themselves dealing daily with survival.

Thirdly, placement at a proper instructional level cannot be

over-emphasized. No child should be asked to perform at frustration level. Every school should have a plan for diagnostically evaluating children for instruction and then diagnosis should be an ongoing process.

Finally, the decision to retain or not to retain a child should be made after a complete evaluation has been accomplished. Too frequently schools have been guilty of retaining, or recycling first and then evaluating only after retention has been unsuccessful. This policy often serves to complicate or prolong an otherwise correctable problem while the real cause goes undiagnosed and valuable remediation time is lost.